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SUBJECT: IRAN: Ahmadinejad Ally Mashaei Lightning Rod for Criticism

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REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: President Ahmadinejad's relationship with his Chief of Staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei has become a source of aggravation for Ahmadinejad's hardline supporters and an easy target for his political opponents. Mashaei has a long history of missteps and provocative comments, most recently a January 10 speech that critics blasted for contravening Islamic principles. In response to this latest affront, critics from across the political spectrum have derided Mashaei's intrusion into religious matters, and hardliners in particular beseeched the president to dump his oft-beleaguered sidekick - to no avail. Ahmadinejad has defended Mashaei through several contentious episodes dating to his first term, and his refusal to remove Mashaei has inspired confusion and derision. As an IRPO contact recently observed, Ahmadinejad's attachment to Mashaei may reflect that the president has a very limited number of trusted lieutenants, Mashaei among them. END SUMMARY.

Background

¶2. (SBU) Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei first became embroiled in controversy during Ahmadinejad's first term, when he served as Vice President for Cultural Heritage and Tourism and also headed Iran's Tourism Organization. As part of a 2005 economic conference in Turkey he attended a cultural ceremony featuring female dancers. A video of Mashaei at the ceremony surfaced a year later and was broadcast on state media, sparking criticism that Mashaei violated Islamic principles by watching women dance. Subsequently, in July 2008 Mashaei elicited broad criticism by deeming Iran a friend of the Israeli people. In the face of fierce criticism, Mashaei reiterated his remarks, prompting a campaign to remove him. Ahmadinejad, however, publically backed Mashaei.

¶3. (SBU) Instead, after his 2009 reelection, Ahmadinejad elevated Mashaei to First Vice President. A mix of Ahmadinejad's conservative detractors and supporters collectively denounced the promotion, citing Mashaei's abovementioned transgressions as well as concerns about his unorthodox religious beliefs. Many in Ahmadinejad's base of support demanded that he retract the order. The opposition to Mashaei, and Ahmadinejad's refusal to acquiesce, eventually compelled Supreme Leader Khamenei to send a letter to Ahmadinejad demanding Mashaei's removal. Incredibly, Ahmadinejad relented only after state media publicized the letter several days later amid warnings that Ahmadinejad must heed Khamenei's wishes. In the face of the Supreme Leader's opposition to Mashaei, Ahmadinejad made Mashaei his Chief of Staff, prompting official IRGC media organs to castigate Ahmadinejad for ignoring the spirit

if not the letter of Khamenei's guidance.

Biography

¶4. (SBU) Mashaei was born in 1960 in Ramsar and attended Esfahan Industrial University, where he studied electrical engineering. The origins of his relationship with Ahmadinejad are unclear, though a Fars News Agency account says they met when Ahmadinejad was governor of the city of Khoi in the late 1980s and Mashaei was serving in the Intelligence Ministry. (NOTE: Mashaei's daughter married Ahmadinejad's son in 2008. END NOTE.) In addition to his past work in the Intelligence Ministry, Mashaei's website lists several other official jobs:

- General Manager for Social Affairs, Interior Ministry
- Manager, Payam Radio Station
- Manager, Tehran Radio Station
- Deputy for Social Affairs and Culture, Tehran Municipality

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- Director, Iran Tourism Organization

¶5. (SBU) Mashaei's website also lists the various posts he currently holds in the Ahmadinejad government beyond his role as chief of staff:

- Director, Center for Study of Globalization
- President's Deputy, Supreme Council for Iranians Abroad
- Member, Government Cultural Committee
- President's Representative, Council Overseeing IRIB
- Member, Government Economic and Cultural Committee

¶6. (SBU) Ahmadinejad's stubborn defense of Mashaei bespeaks his importance as a key advisor for the increasingly isolated president; he also has emerged as a spokesman for the Ahmadinejad administration. Ahmadinejad has even told press that he would gladly serve as Vice-President in a Mashaei administration, prompting many to speculate that Ahmadinejad seeks to have Mashaei replace him in 2013.

A Political Punching Bag

¶7. (C) Since his installation as Chief of Staff, Mashaei has attracted far more attention for his 'unofficial' comments about religion, bearing out the earlier whispers that the opposition to Mashaei stemmed from his unorthodox religious views. An IRPO contact last summer said many clerics were concerned by Mashaei's belief in the imminent return of the Twelfth Imam and by the intrusion of a layman into religious matters. During Ahmadinejad's second term Mashaei has repeatedly stoked withering criticism by airing his religious views - and, in doing so, provided great fodder too for the president's political foes.

¶8. (C) The criticism of Mashaei, and Ahmadinejad by association, is both real and opportunistic. Ahmadinejad's hardline backers bristle at Mashaei's presence in his government and time again beseech him to dump him. Kayhan Newspaper in November responded to a Mashaei assertion that 'God is not the axis of unity among men' by arguing that his comments contravene Islam and other religions and suggesting to Ahmadinejad that the government, the people of Iran, and the president himself would all be better off without Mashaei. The IRGC newspaper Sobh-e Sadeh a week later sent Ahmadinejad the same message—that he should abandon Mashaei.

¶9. (C) On January 10 during a university speech Mashaei invited derision by denigrating past prophets' management ability. According to BBC Farsi, Mashaei pointed out that the prophet Noah (there are many prophets in Islam) lived for 950 years and even in that time was not able to establish 'justice,' thus creating the need for more prophets. A clerical supporter responded by complaining that Mashaei's presence on the Ahmadinejad government causes much pain for the president's supporters. Kayhan followed suit and carried an article mocking Mashaei and asking that he stay out of such matters. Ahmadinejad's brother Davud, the former head of the president's office of inspection, accused Mashaei of saying "absurd" things to keep the system busy and to prevent progress towards Khomeini's goals. He mockingly implied that Mashaei's only 'accomplishment' is his friendship with Hooshang Amir Ahmadi. (COMMENT: Davud Ahmadinejad, who resigned his position as in August 2008, reportedly did so due to disagreements with his brother regarding Mashaei. END COMMENT.)

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¶10. (SBU) Ahmadinejad's opponents use the president's relationship with Mashaei for mockery and to score political points. Numerous IRPO contacts have related well known anecdotes about Mashaei's religious views and firm belief in the imminent return of the Twelfth Imam. Among them is the political 'urban myth' in Tehran that Ahmadinejad's devotion to Mashaei is said to stem from his belief that Mashaei is in fact in direct contact with the Twelfth Imam. According to these rumors, Mashaei allegedly occasionally enters a trance-like state to communicate with the Twelfth Imam or will sometimes randomly say 'hello' to no one at all and then explain that the Twelfth Imam just passed by.

¶11. (SBU) On January 17 the moderate website 'Ayande News' carried an article about a meeting between Ahmadinejad and his supporters in which he defended Mashaei and referred to him as 'Ohleeh ollah', a title reserved for Islam's most revered. Afterwards, the meeting's organizer compared the relationship of Ahmadinejad and Mashaei to that of a 'disciple and a mystic master.' The oppositionist website 'Rah-e Sabz' has carried innumerable derogatory stories about Mashaei, among them allegations that Mashaei has assisted in the sale of Iranian antiquities outside of the country and that Mashaei's family members have received jobs at the state-owned carmaker Saipa.

¶12. (SBU) The recent attacks on Mashaei seemingly culminated with reports of Mashaei's resignation. On January 20, for example, the website 'Khabar Online' (affiliated with Majlis Speaker Larijani) published rumors that Mashaei would soon resign his position. The report cited a Majlis member who said that he regarded Mashaei as a "spent force." However, Mashaei that day denied the reports of his resignation and the protests continued. BBC Farsi on January 27 reported that a Majlis faction aligned with traditional conservatives, the 'Front of the Followers of the Line of the Imam and the Supreme Leader,' sent Ahmadinejad a letter asking him to remove Mashaei.

¶13. (C) COMMENT: Mashaei's presence in the Ahmadinejad government and the criticism he elicits illustrates some of the ongoing factional divisions in Tehran. That Larijani and other more moderate principlists use Mashaei to badger Ahmadinejad is not surprising; these camps have been jockeying for position since the 2005 presidential election campaign. More interesting is the criticism from Ahmadinejad's hardline supporters. These hardliners still rely on the traditional clergy for a patina of Islamic legitimacy, and the clerical class' near universal distaste for Mashaei's version of Islam contributes to the hardline animosity to Ahmadinejad. To date, the criticism of Mashaei has stopped short of attacking Ahmadinejad directly, but his backers seem increasingly weary of Mashaei's antics and Ahmadinejad's patience for them. Ahmadinejad, who reportedly believes Mashaei is merely misunderstood, seems doggedly determined to retain his chief of staff even in the face of protests from his base. It was only with Khamenei's direct intervention that Ahmadinejad grudgingly retracted Mashaei's elevation to first vice president; it seems that to depose Mashaei, his critics may need to enlist the Supreme Leader once again. END COMMENT.
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